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Work of the Disciples of Christ in Porto Rico

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Work of the Disciples of Christ in Porto Rico

WORKERS in Porto Rico are constantly impressed by the passing of the old and the coming of things modern, usually — not always — better. Now is the meeting point. The broad-wheeled ox-cart is hurried to one side by the clanging automobile. The Black mantillad senora sits beside her daughter with gown and hat in the latest New York style. Children speak English at school and Spanish at home. Thatched huts are giving place to lightly built wooden cottages. The sewing machine is heard in the land. An electric light shines out from age-old Morro Castle. In the coast towns, at least, the dominant note is progress, which is filtering back through the hills. A middle class is rising. We are in the midst of the making of Americans.

One is safe in Porto Rico. The stars and stripes are a familiar sight. Governor Colton will not be entangled in the petty politics of the island, but talks organized Boards of Trade, better coffee, more carefully packed fruit, larger docks, alike to Republican and Unionist. Every district has its gray-coated, clean-faced, vigilant police corps. The Fourth of July and Washington's birthday are legal holidays. We feel at home in a foreign land.

One may live comfortably in Porto Rico. In every town stores are springing up which carry American goods and have clerks that speak English "a little." As to climate, a Lutheran missionary said it was no fun to look at the thermometer—it was always 85. So we do not need your pitying letters, wondering how we stand the heat down here, where it is "so much warmer." There is usually a good breeze. Hats must be securely pinned, paper weights are appreciated gifts and books must be laid with backs to the east.

Where there are children in the mission home, school is an absorbing, sometimes a heart-breaking topic. Not so in the pueblos of this smiling isle. Even here we are looking into the future, to ultimate statehood, but Uncle Sam, while believing his nephews should govern themselves, as firmly declares they should know how, so he provides them with schools. Usually each municipality has an American superintendent of schools and several American teachers. In Bayamon there will be ten grades next year, besides classes in music, drawing and night schools. The grades follow closely the work at home, using many familiar text books, with the addition of Spanish. Fifty teachers are under the direction of this alert superintendent, twenty of them teaching rural schools in the twelve barrios of the municipality. The getting of good teachers has been a problem. Several years ago a normal school was started in Rio Piedras, where young people who have passed the ninth grade (and this will be raised as the schools in the

island advance) may, with no cost to themselves but board, take a two or a four-year course in a modern school, where beside the regular curriculum domestic science or manual training is required. The school has an agricultural department also, and others will be added. We call it a university, though the university lies more in our hopes than in the reality. One hundred and fifty-nine young people graduated from this school this year. The Commissioner of Education says the supply of teachers has met the demand.

All of the work of the Disciples of Christ is in the municipalities of Bayamon and Toa Baja, just south of San Juan. Three lines of work are followed—Orphanage, School and Evangelistic.

The Girls' Orphanage work was begun in August, 1900, in the old municipal building in Bayamon.. October, 1909, it was moved across the street from the Boys' Orphanage in Hato Tejas, two miles west of town. The girls occupied two cottages, several rods apart, having three houses between them. Recently the mission bought for fourteen hundred dollars the larger cottage, called the Red House, because in the dim past it was painted that brilliant hue. This house, which would remind you of a rather dilapidated summer cottage at home, had long been rented, with its six acres of mountain and ravine, by the mission and occupied by the Irelands, Altons and Carpenters as a Mission Home. When conditions made a move desirable, the three-foot native balcony was extended to eight feet and used by the

girls for dining, sewing, study and sitting room. When our tropical showers come pelting down with little warning there is an instant scurrying of girls with plates of rice and beans or half-darned stockings. Because the girls sleeping in the smaller houses were frequently annoyed, one week in June, 1911, the men of the mission laid aside the pen and, wielding the hammer, put a temporary dormitory and small room for sick ones on the west side of the house, so that work and worry—yes, and rent money—might be saved. Here twenty-three girls, remarkably modest and refined when compared with those outside, receive daily instruction in housework, sewing, drawnwork and the Bible.

In 1902 a tract of land was bought for a home for boys. In December, 1906, a sixteen-thousand-dollar cement building was dedicated, and soon after the boys were admitted. The thirty-seven boys, with Superintendent Vanneter and his family, make a bustling community. The boys are taught to do the most of the work about the home, to care for the horses, some help on the farm and a class are learning to make shoes. Religious services are held in the schoolroom conducted by the orphanage workers and the two teachers. All orphanage children are expected to attend church and many of the older ones are members of the church.

In the large schoolroom at the Boys' Orphanage Miss Siler and Miss Lacock conduct the school for our orphanage boys and girls. Eight grades were covered last year. Our teachers

are handicapped by having to teach in one room. For some years the mission has conducted a three-grade school on Comerio street in Bayamon. This has been taught the past two years by an orphanage girl, Providencia Navarro. The school meets in an old dwelling house from which the partitions have been removed and the walls roughly whitewashed. At the beginning of the work at Dajous the people were promised a school. In November, 1910, Lorenza Velez, also an orphanage girl, was sent to gather the children of that district into a school, which meets in the chapel. Lorenza and her mother live in a house formerly occupied by Manuel Torres. She visits in the homes and teaches in the Bible School.

In 1905 the evangelistic work started by the American Christian Missionary Society in March, 1899, was taken over by the Christian Woman's Board of Missions. There are now two evangelistic centers—Bayamon and Dajous.

Bayamon is the older work. In 1908 the cement church building, a gift of the Kentucky sisters at a cost of nearly seven thousand dollars, was dedicated. The church has three classrooms, electric lights, baptistry, and when we can secure new chairs and an organ will meet all present demands.

A lot has been purchased for a Mission Home, where a cottage is steadily rising. Services are held weekly in the rented schoolroom on Comerio street, where half-clad children and tired-eyed adults swarm over the old-fashioned benches and baby organ, filling

the little house and crowding about the door. A lot was bought in June, 1911, and we hope to have a chapel soon. Weekly services are also held in Minillas, where the newly-made converts meet in the thatched-roof home of a hospitable native. The missionary in charge at Bayamon, beside holding eight services weekly, keeps in touch with the work in the Gutierrez District and the volunteer work in Minillas, visiting each twice a month and meeting the workers weekly for conference and instruction. Five miles northwest of Bayamon is a group of four hamlets, where our native evangelist, S. G. Williams, and his wife, Belen, live and work. In this section we have a wooden chapel at Gutierrez, erected in 1910 in a palm grove, where a lot was given by the man of whom the former meeting place had been rented. The people, though poor, pay nearly half of the cost and freely help the missionaries with their unskilled labor. They bought their own bell, planted a rose garden in front, recently raised the money to paint the inside a beautifully bright blue, and with the old organ from the Bayamon church are quite happy. The work in the other hamlets is new and as yet the congregations meet in the open air or native homes, which are gladly offered, but are inadequate.

Back toward the center of Porto Rico, in the coffee hills, there lives a purer-minded, independent people, with less negro and more Spanish in their make-up. Poor and ignorant they surely are, and as yet little touched by the influences on the coast, though here and there

the flag waves over rudely constructed buildings, where wiggling, barefoot youngsters are trying to master an education. In such a place, twelve miles southwest of Bayamon and three miles away from a wagon road, the hill work of our mission was begun at Dajous in April, 1907. In the autumn of the same year the small but already outgrown chapel was built. Manuel Torres, of justly earned fame, has been the leader and guide of this staunch little flock. Some relatives of Manuel Torres lived in Barrio Nuevo, three miles away. Services were held there, the missionary in Bayamon kept an eye on the work and in March, 1910, two mission families camped on the mountain top, where, amid fern, trees and palms, through which one caught glimpses of the beautiful Plata—silver—River and the distant Atlantic and God seemed very near, a lot had been given for our second chapel in the hills. The men toiled bravely up paths over which we slowly crept, carrying great loads of zinc and lumber on their heads. Dajous helped with money and muscle and finally the day of triumphant dedication came. It was found that the people here had raised a little more than half the money for their church home.

During the summer of 1910, Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter moved to the hills and built their pleasant mission home on the Comerio Road, some eight miles from Bayamon. In the autumn Mr. Carpenter began weekly services at lower Dajous, near his home; six services a month in Naranjito, just west of Barrio Nuevo;

once a month he goes to Juan Asencio, the barrio east of Dajous, and also as often across the river west to Guadiano. Then twice a month he goes to Dajous and Barrio Nuevo each. To reach several of these places he must follow steep mountain paths where no wagon can go.

The work of the Disciples of Christ is not large, nor can it be. If the evangelization of Porto Rico means the placing of the preaching of the Gospel within the reach of every person, it is easily within sight. If it means the training of a pure, self-reliant native church there is work to do in this island where now but one person in each one hundred four professes to be a member of a Protestant church. A map was prepared by the M. E. Mission and sent to the "World in Boston," which shows Porto Rico thickly dotted over by preaching points under the direction of over one hundred American missionaries. There has been a tacit understanding of the division of the land not quite so definite as Grose would make it appear. Once in two years all denominations meet for conference—in two cities at least. Ministerial associations are organized, our own missionaries meeting with those in San Juan. The intercourse between missions is usually courteous; all workers are admitted to the Methodist Rest Home, at Aibonito, to cure tired minds and nerves; at the Presbyterian Hospital, at Santuree, tired bodies are healed whether Presbyterian or Baptist, Catholic or Christian. Our own little district near Bayamon is small and as we ad-

vanee we soon find organized work in every direction. Bayamon, a town of nearly nine thousand inhabitants, has two missions, the Lutheran ably led by a eonsecrated young Seandinavian missionary and his wife, and our own. On the north, between us and the Atlantie, is a line of organized Lutheran churehes, at Monacillo, Catano, Pala Seca, Toa Baja and Dorado. On the east, at Rio Piedras, eight miles away, the Baptists hold a strategie position where they are building a native training school on the edge of the university eampus where their students may freely enter the university classes so that they will teaeh the Biblical subjeets only. Farther south are the strong Baptist eenters, at Caguas and Cayey. On the south Comerio is a M. E. center, holding serviees in ten surrounding places. On the west, in Candalaria, the next barrio to Hato Tejas, in Toa Alta, in Corazol and Naranjito the Presbyterians have long established and earefully trained churches and preaching points. Our work ean not be large, but there is no reason why it can not be a good work, eommanding the respect of all other missions and changing lives for Christ. Every missionary feels pledged to do his part in making it so.

M. B. Wood.

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